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Contact: Shelley Dawicki
508-495-2378
Shelley.Dawicki@noaa.gov

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High Number of North Atlantic Right Whales Sighted off Rhode Island

New Mother/Calf Pair Confirmed

A NOAA whale research team sighted 57 endangered North Atlantic right whales, including four mother/calf pairs, on April 22 while conducting an aerial survey of Rhode Island Sound. The aerial survey team is based at the Northeast Fisheries Science Center's Laboratory in Woods Hole, Mass. In late April 2010 the team documented a record 102 North Atlantic right whales in these and nearby waters.

"Last year was a record year off Rhode Island, and many right whales were also sighted off Provincetown last week, so we expected to see some whales," said Peter Duley, whale researcher at NOAA's Northeast Fisheries Science Center (NEFSC) who was on the aerial team. "The last time we flew in this area, on April 7, we observed eight right whales, including a new mother /calf pair not seen in the southeast calving ground, which is very exciting. We saw that same mother with her new calf again on Friday. It is her fifth known calf."

Many of the right whales were seen feeding at the surface and were quite easy to spot. "We noticed two or three and then found 17 feeding in the first group we encountered," said Duley. "We also saw some sei whales as well, which is not unusual since they like the same food."

"We're excited that we've found a large congregation again this year in Rhode Island Sound and at the same time of year," said Allison Henry, who was also on the flight. "It appears that, like last year, they are not the same individual whales either, which means that roughly a third of the entire known population has been seen around Cape Cod and southern New England within one week. That's pretty amazing!"

All of the whales were actively surface feeding, indicating dense patches of copepods, the tiny marine zooplankton on which right whales feed. During this time of year, right whales are migrating through southern New England waters generally headed northward to feed at different times and places throughout the summer.

"It's wonderful to see so many right whales in the area feeding, and especially to see mother and calf pairs," added Christin Khan, the third member of the NEFSC's aerial survey team. "With such a small population the birth of each new calf is one more step on the path to recovery. We are thrilled to discover another new calf in addition to the 20 already confirmed for the season."

The whales were sighted within waters that are also part of a seasonal management area for large whales intended to reduce the risk of harmful collisions. North Atlantic right whales are particularly susceptible to collisions with vessels, causing serious injuries and deaths of the animals. The likelihood of a seriously harmful collision is reduced when vessel speeds are slowed.

Within the area, vessels 65 feet or larger are required to abide by a speed limit of 10 knots or less between November 1 and April 30 of each year. NOAA has announced additional protection in adjacent areas by implementing a short-term management area that mariners are asked to either avoid or, while transiting, to voluntarily reduce speeds to 10 knots or less.

Another source of human-caused injuries and deaths among large whales is entanglement in some kinds of fishing gear. Pot /trap and gillnet fishermen throughout the northeast are required to rig their gear to make it less likely to injure or kill a whale that encounters it, and to mark gear to help identify any entangling line or gear that is recovered from an entangled animal.

NOAA's Northeast marine mammal aerial survey team completes hundreds of survey flight hours annually over the waters off the northeast and flies much of the year, weather permitting. The April 2011 and 2010 aggregations off Rhode Island rival those documented in December 2008, when [the team spotted 44 right whales in Jordan Basin](#) in the central Gulf of Maine where they expected to see no more than a few. That finding challenged accepted thinking about feeding and mating grounds in New England.

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Related links:

North Atlantic Right Whales:

http://www.nmfs.noaa.gov/pr/species/mammals/cetaceans/rightwhale_northatlantic.html

NEFSC Protected Species Branch: <http://www.nefsc.noaa.gov/psb/surveys/index.html>

NEFSC Aerial Survey Group: <http://www.nefsc.noaa.gov/psb/surveys/psbAerialPeople.html>

Approaching North Atlantic Right Whales: http://www.nero.noaa.gov/prot_res/mmv/regs.html

NOAA Ship Strike Reduction website: <http://www.nmfs.noaa.gov/pr/shipstrike/>